

## Missions: Balancing Evangelism and Benevolence

By Bob Young

As one considers the mission work of a local congregation, two questions surface: What are we spending our money on? What are the results of our efforts?

I have observed an increasing focus on “benevolent” missions. In recent years, the church has little by little moved toward mission work that is more benevolent than evangelistic. A lot of “mission money” is spent on things that are minimally evangelistic with limited eternal impact.

One must ask why this has occurred. Why is there a level of benevolence in missions that the churches generally do not duplicate in the US?

Perhaps it is because we are not very good at doing benevolence in the U.S. and are not satisfied with our efforts in this area. Perhaps there is a felt need to be more benevolent based on this perceived lack. That is, we tend toward benevolent mission work because we know we are deficient in this area in many local churches. Historically much benevolent work of churches has been done distantly more than locally.

Another possible reason presents greater concern. Perhaps this change reflects the subtle impact of the “social gospel.” In historical studies, churches tend toward a social gospel when they lose confidence in the Christian message.

We may misunderstand evangelism. Some believe that a mere benevolent presence will automatically draw people; but we have no Bible example where Christians were benevolent and as a result people obeyed the gospel. McGavran observed that when we work to establish benevolent works without proclamation and persuasion, after ten or twenty years, all that is left is the benevolent work we established, i.e. hospitals, schools, shelters, orphanages. In the final analysis, churches grow because the gospel is preached and acted upon.

How shall we evaluate mission work? We spend tremendous amounts of money on benevolent works. Many mission efforts yield very little spiritual return in evangelism, church planting and development, with churches capable of self-government, self-sustenance, and self-propagation.

It is true that a soul is worth whatever efforts are required to gain it, but should we not, as good stewards, be concerned about the best return for dollars spent? Should we not be concerned about developing healthy churches and Christians who can escape dependence on US dollars?

The number of baptisms may help evaluate mission work, but the goal is more than baptisms. A church involved in supporting mission work deserves to know how many souls are being won to Christ—and how those souls are being integrated into and involved in growing, local congregations as churches are established and strengthened. The goal includes the establishment of local self-sustaining congregations with biblical leaders. Churches need healthy measurements based on realistic goals.

Elders and missions committees do well to ask questions such as these: What is the result of the money spent? Are souls being won? Are churches being strengthened? Are Christians learning to evangelize, to teach, to lead? Are churches growing spiritually and developing according to the New Testament pattern?

I support every good work done in the name of Jesus, including work with the needy, orphans, children, education, and families. The question raised in this article is, “What is the balance or integration between benevolent efforts and evangelistic activities?”